

University of Mary Washington

**Eagle Scholar**

---

Student Research Submissions

---

Spring 4-2020

## On Reconciling Contemporary Feminism and Marxism

claire parkey

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholar.umw.edu/student\\_research](https://scholar.umw.edu/student_research)



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

parkey, claire, "On Reconciling Contemporary Feminism and Marxism" (2020). *Student Research Submissions*. 339.

[https://scholar.umw.edu/student\\_research/339](https://scholar.umw.edu/student_research/339)

This Honors Project is brought to you for free and open access by Eagle Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Research Submissions by an authorized administrator of Eagle Scholar. For more information, please contact [archives@umw.edu](mailto:archives@umw.edu).

**On Reconciling Contemporary Feminism and Marxism**

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
Honors in Philosophy

University of Mary Washington  
Fredericksburg, Virginia

Claire Parkey

Philosophy 485

4/20/2020

Supervised by Professor Craig Vasey

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>I. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>II. THE RISE OF PATRIARCHAL POWER IN PREHISTORIC RELATIONS AND PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>III. CAPITALISM, WOMEN, AND THE FAMILY: PATRIARCHAL ENTITLEMENT IN THE MODERN WORLD.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>IV. CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>30</b>

## I. Introduction

Feminists have long looked towards progressive philosophers from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries for inspiration and methodologies; unsurprisingly, Karl Marx is one of the most popular theorists to critique and expand upon. Marx's work redefined what it meant to be a philosopher, and his theories of history, class, and economics are revolutionary. Most importantly, they lend themselves well to reapplication in studies of oppression beyond his original intentions.

Recent movements within feminist philosophy have aimed to reclaim history from predominantly androcentric narratives while looking to explain the source of female oppression; these projects focus on historical research coupled with theories of historical materialism to synthesize concrete reality with abstract conceptual thought. By elevating the voices of women and appropriating theories which otherwise ignore the female plight, feminist philosophers are carving out new positions for discourse on oppression and patriarchy. This thesis is specifically concerned with feminist narratives of the historic conditions which led to women's societal subordination, and the application of Marxist and historical materialist analyses to the current situations of women in the west.<sup>1</sup> By assimilating historical accounts/theories on the development and progression of gender dynamics in prehistory and primitive accumulation with theories/accounts of the subordination of women in the modern era under capitalism, the greater issue of the origin and perpetuation of contemporary patriarchal capitalism can be understood from a more holistic- and ultimately, more useful- perspective.

---

<sup>1</sup> Author's note: "historical materialism" is used to refer to the methodologies utilized by Marx and other dialectical materialist philosophers; "Marxism" is used to refer to those specific contributions and theories established and expounded by Marx.

## II. The Rise of Patriarchal Power in Prehistoric Relations and Primitive Accumulation

Primitive accumulation is generally a concept used to describe the transition from chattel slavery and feudalism to capitalist modes of production. The interpretation of this concept is one which has been increasingly debated and has become of great importance to feminist philosophers. Expounded in detail by Engels and addressed briefly by Marx, primitive accumulation was picked up by feminists as a tool to discover the social and historical roots of patriarchal oppression of women. This continuing endeavor is obviously politically and strategically motivated, but the necessity of this question is not impacted by this bias, rather, it only affects the outcome. The methodology is inherently different as thinkers within this movement are concerned with finding a solution from the course of history than theorizing on the patterns of history. This is where feminist accounts of primitive accumulation depart from those purely historical materialist or psychoanalytic accounts. Maria Mies' comprehensive exploration of the term and its use in the philosophical tradition illustrates this point: "without understanding the foundation and the functioning of the asymmetric relationship between men and women, it is not possible to overcome it... [the] aim is not merely to analyze or to find an interpretation of an old problem, the purpose is rather to solve it."<sup>2</sup> This increased interest was a small part of a greater movement for a taking back of history from the patriarchy; the feminist movement wanted to reclaim the overlooked narratives of women throughout these periods as well. Study of primitive accumulation has the potential to offer an answer to what may be referred to as the question of origin as well as giving a platform for a new unbiased account of history from the perspective of women. It is a necessary subject of study for historical

---

<sup>2</sup> Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation*, (London, UK: Zed Books, 2014), 44

materialists and feminists alike; more recent works by philosophers such as Maria Mies and Silvia Federici offer critical additions to the continuing exploration of the historical and material sources of female oppression.

Engels' *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* is arguably the first endeavor to give an in-depth account of primitive accumulation, and moreover, *Origin of the Family* is one of the first works to attempt to explain the origin of the devaluation of female labor and the usurping of matrilineage. To describe the origin of the monogamous, patriarchal family, Engels turns to anthropological work done by Lewis Morgan, and in turn, some of Karl Marx's notes on Morgan's work. From Morgan's work, Engels cites four stages of the family in prehistory: consanguine family, punaluan family, pairing family, and finally, the monogamous family. The consanguine family and the punaluan family are both defined by an increasing taboo on incestuous relations. The consanguine family allows for relations between brothers and sisters, but not ancestors and progeny. The punaluan family pushes this taboo to include relations between siblings and this taboo gradually grows to include relations between more distant members of the immediate family such as cousins of the same generation. These are necessary steps in the development of the institution, but the fundamental shift in gender relations comes in during the period of the pairing family.

The pairing family begins the transition from polygamy to monogamy; heads of households begin to pick favorites of their spouses, and there is a focus on enforced female fidelity in order to claim an economic right for potential offspring. Women still have a measure of power over the domestic spheres, and there is greater overlap of labor responsibilities so that there is not a terribly apparent asymmetrical division of labor. Marriage or coupling in the form of the pairing family is, as asserted by Engels, taken up in mutual consent and may be dissolved

with mutual consent at any time. This begins to shift with economic transitions; namely, the genesis of private property. Accumulation of wealth in its various forms and the desire to leave that wealth to progeny put increasing restraints on women's sexual freedom. Chastity and virginity begin to be valued for proprietary purposes. This is the substantive economic turning point. The monogamous family quickly follows from this.

Famously, Engels attributed the "world-historic defeat of the female sex" to the usurping of the mother right, which presumably predates the four stages of family development. The killing blow is delivered with the introduction of forced female fidelity (and monogamy) supported by very real repercussions for adultery; this power is lorded specifically over women, and men are excluded from the social, economic, and legislative persecution of sexual freedom outside of the marital bed. The introduction of private property into society and the economy explains the subordinate role that women take in historical society. The bonds of monogamy and necessity of traceable patrilineage in those early societies prior to civilization situated women socially (or, as Engels seems to assert, evolutionarily) in a vulnerable position; after the introduction of private property, the line between means of object production and the means of human production (procreation) began to blur. Women became objects, resources to accumulate in order to quite literally propagate a man's wealth and secure the longevity of his name.<sup>3</sup>

This is quite obviously a sweeping explication of Engels' pseudo-anthropological conception of the development of the family; some of the finer points of Engels' account are glossed over, but the key transitions of gender dynamics within the family are the most important assertions made in the piece. Engels also gives a parallel account of so-called primitive economic progression to support his assertions about the family, but it seems that the development of the

---

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Engels, "The Family" in *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, (New York City: International Publishers, 1975), 35-102

family is treated with an evolutionary tone conspicuously differentiated from the dialectical tone of the accounts of economic development. For example, in a description of the transition from the pairing family, Engels attributes this change to women's natural desire for monogamy:

Bachofen is also perfectly right when he consistently maintains that the transition from what he calls "Hetaerism" or "Sumpfzeugung" to monogamy was brought about primarily through the women. The more the traditional sexual relations lost the native primitive character of forest life, owing to the development of economic conditions with consequent undermining of the old communism and growing density of population, the more oppressive and humiliating must the women have felt them to be, and the greater their longing for the right of chastity, of temporary or permanent marriage with one man only, as a way of release.<sup>4</sup>

This is questionable at best and suggestive of biological determinism at worst; though Engels seems sympathetic, the tone of this section implies that women would have inevitably turned towards monogamy. This dismissive tone is not uncommon in the works of Marx and Engels regarding women. Notice that though human action is separated into reproduction and labor, only the development and progression of labor is treated as historical. Work that was/seemed to be mostly under the purview of women- childbearing and child rearing- is not treated as labor, but rather as instinct. These are natural, primitive processes to Marx and Engels, not to be considered productive labor. While *Origin of the Family* is still a significant turning point in philosophical discourse on women, it clearly has its issues.

Critiques of *Origin* point to questionable source data, inherent biological deterministic bias, and a strange combination of shortsightedness and over ambition, but the possible issues with his account do not negate the implications and effects that the piece has had on discussions of women and labor.<sup>5</sup> Catherine MacKinnon aptly describes the sheer importance of *Origin* as

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> MacKinnon, 23; Mies, 43-45



an unprecedented work in early feminist historical materialism: “Engels thus grants that women are specially oppressed, that they are second-class citizens compared with men, that this occurs structurally in the family, antedates the current economic order, and needs to be changed. Engels attempts to set women's subjection within a totality of necessary but changeable social relations—as necessary and changeable as class society.”<sup>6</sup> The importance of Engels’ work can be found in its reframing of a question of growing urgency. Now, as feminist philosophies move beyond the contextual boundaries which brought about *Origin of the Family*, the piece is still just as existentially provocative in its fundamental assertions of the situational exploitation of women through the family. Maria Mies’ *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* is a perfect example of this. Mies effectively takes the philosophical legacy of Engels (and others as well) and revives the discussion of primitive accumulation and the role which it plays in the historical and continuing exploitation of women.

Mies’ account of primitive accumulation and the patriarchy is an incredibly vast study of the subject worldwide, which can be either a credit or a detriment to the work. Much may be said about *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, but for the sake of brevity this essay will discuss Mies’ major departures from and criticisms of historical materialism.

Maria Mies begins her piece by exploring the relations between humans and nature and the ways that these relations affect labor. She argues that Marx and Engels entered explorations of gender relations with a presupposition of a measure of biological determinism. Women are described as “natural” whereas men are described as “social,” which implies a certain inevitability and unavoidable momentum. Women are treated in their works as though a great degree of their future is already set in stone while men have autonomy over their labor. This

---

<sup>6</sup> Catherine MacKinnon, *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State*, (London: Harvard University Press, 1985), 21

carries on in Engels and Marx in the form of the separation of mental and menial labor.

Women's labor is treated as mentally unengaging; this obviously leads to issues with women's historicity and social engagement: "If we were to follow Engels, we would have to relegate women's interaction with nature to the sphere of evolution... We would have to conclude that women have not yet entered history (as defined by Engels) and still basically belong to the animal world."<sup>7</sup>

After challenging this conception of human nature, Mies goes on to question historical materialist accounts of body/nature relations. Women interact with nature in a fundamentally, biologically, and experientially different body than men. Labor, and in turn, the ways in which one appropriates nature for their purposes is shaped by lived body experience. This is another overlooked aspect of women's experience in accumulation and capitalism; Mies explores this more in terms of relation to nature. Moving past the discussion of fundamental concepts in historical materialism and the errors in the ways in which they were considered by early Marxists, Mies begins to reevaluate the worth of women's work.

Mies argues that women's labor -and productivity, though much female labor is not viewed that way in a rigid reading of Marx- is a precondition of male productivity. The sexual division of labor is not possible without the preexistence of female productivity. The anthropological archetype of man-the-hunter is impossible without stability in the home. To achieve this, men must equally contribute to the home until women's productivity exceeds and negates the necessity of men's household contributions.<sup>8</sup> Until the home is stable in and of itself- through the effort of women- men cannot leave the home to contribute with their own productive labor. Male labor cannot therefore be different from female labor and comparatively more

---

<sup>7</sup> Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, 52

<sup>8</sup> Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, 50-59

productive without female labor being productive first. There is no sexual division of labor without an indication of productivity on the end of the more static party. Accumulation cannot begin without a measure of regular security and reliability of productive labor. From this separation of stationary duties and nomadic interests, there arises a differentiation in tools, framed from a fundamental difference in relations to nature and each other.

Women develop the first productive relation to nature, Mies argues. By relating to their entire body, by appropriating the inherent power in their body as a tool of production, they adopt a fundamentally different relationship with the world around them. Childbearing and rearing are holistic practices that cannot be done half-heartedly or in total dissonance with nature. Women's relationship with nature is reciprocal, like their relationship with their children. In early childhood, girls are conditioned to relate to their peers and their environment in a system of give and take. Men learn their bodies and relate to them as disjointed sections of a whole; their power of production is in their hands and their head. In this way, their relationship with the world around them is based upon their ability to interact with nature using these faculties. Men and boys did not initially give back to nature in the way that women did. Women's relation to nature was productive while men's relation to nature was reductive. This is another significant point in Mies' analysis of accumulation. Men create tools of exploitation, she argues. Men's work becomes linked with exploitative actions and domination because of the actions necessary in roaming/hunting. The methods used by men to tame the wilds and manipulate the world around them were later applied to tame their wives and families, Mies seems to argue. The tools only highlight the possibility of exploitation, but the predatory nature of this kind of creation is of note. Later, when men become less dependent on female productivity in the home and the use-

value of dangerous, predatory skills increases, the dynamics shift. This change comes in the genesis of agriculture, Mies suggests.<sup>9</sup>

Maria Mies discusses multiple theories of the origin of female exploitation in various groups following the agricultural revolution. She summarizes the pastoralist theory of interaction, which states that the sexual exploitation of women arose from the domestication of animals and observation and implementation of breeding techniques; the agriculturalist theory, which states that older men took more wives in order to work the land harder, which then led to the accumulation of slaves and creation of private property. Both theories rely on the social relations of men and the tools which they create. Men make tools of coercion and there is no way to avoid this fact.<sup>10</sup> This is the crux of the argument subtly presented in Maria Mies' account of accumulation and the transition to what Engels calls civilization: there is no such thing as a natural division of labor by gender, there is only a difference in the way in which men and women learned to interact with the world around them. These relations were inherited from parent to child until they became tradition and were incorporated into the new organization of society and labor.

Patriarchalism fully transforms into institutional patriarchy somewhere during the middle of feudalism. Consumers and non-producers fight violently to acquire producers and means of production. Coercive force is utilized to maintain the master-slave dynamic, and women rarely broke the bondage of this relation. Marriage cemented this and irrevocably entwined love, sex, and labor in the relation of the family. Men in power became managers of social reproduction. Mies points to laws like the right of *prima noctis* as the patriarch's (the state's) exertion of power

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 62-65

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 66

over those in his care.<sup>11</sup> Slaves and peasants were also tied to the land in a legal representation of the attempt to assimilate weaker subjects into nature to then tame it. Structural violence maintained the rigid hierarchy differently than violent altercation did, but chains are chains no matter how they are fashioned.

Later the peasantry would rebel, but revolution is impossible when the dominant group holds a monopoly over tools of coercion. Silvia Federici agrees with Mies on the conception of serfdom as superficially liberating but structurally violent; Federici points out that serfs had direct access to the means of production and reproduction in a way that chattel slaves did not. They also had the ability to pass on some semblance of inheritance to their children and support themselves, in a way. Outright force and the promise of it was fundamental for feudal exploitation, and the feudal manor represented a relentless class struggle. Taxes and debt became tangible oppressive forces as the commutation of labor services for money became widely accepted. The lower classes became enslaved by debt; after that point, it was difficult to measure exploitation as the peasantry could now exploit each other. Income differences then became class differences. Women especially began to lose even more autonomy and access to property and income as widespread commercialization occurred. Urban areas grew to be sanctuaries where women may find some measure of freedom in work and communal living. The Church's growing influence soon sought to stifle this, however. Christians needed their disciples to procreate and tithe in order to keep their religion alive; as it accumulated power, the Church began to emphasize rhetoric that relegated sex as only reproductive. Desire and sexuality could be objects of power for women, and the careful control of them through shaming and demonizing

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 67-69

narratives was the only option for an institution desperate to combat the more progressive heretical schools.<sup>12</sup>

Revolutions in feudal states often did not greatly challenge the place of women. In a way, it was never a question of whether women were property, only one of whether other men should be.<sup>13</sup> Capitalism reframed these forms of coercive violence, but the outcomes were still the same; imperialism and colonialism were founded on the base of economic coercion and structural violence as well. Mies and Federici craft an account of primitive accumulation and the historical, social, and economic origins of the subjugation of women. Their account runs parallel to that of Engels' *Origin of the Family*, yet Mies does not avoid all the biases and issues for which she criticizes Engels. She establishes that *Origin of the Family* falls prey to the idea that there is some biological weakness inherent to women which ensured their oppression, yet she does not notice that her own account also seems to conclude that the oppression of women was, in a way, inevitable. In Mies' account, women may have taken part in history, but they had no agency. This description is not all that dissimilar to Engels'-in form or in content; Mies just has the luxury of an extra century of philosophical discourse from which to draw. In addition to this, Mies utilizes terms like "object-relations" without adequately defining them. *Patriarchy and Accumulation* offers a compelling improvement to the foundation laid by Engels and Marx in *Origin of the Family*. Federici avoids the tone of determinism present in both *Origin* and *Patriarchy and Accumulation*, but this is only due to the fact that she does not present a concrete theory of prehistory relations of her own; Federici is concerned with primitive accumulation instead. This is not to say that Mies and Federici offer a perfect argument- but overall, their

---

<sup>12</sup> Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, (New York City, NY: Autonomedia, 2014), 40

<sup>13</sup> Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, 69-73

accounts are more cognizant of historic context and the experience of women than other male theorists before them.

### III. Capitalism, Women, and the Family: Patriarchal Entitlement in the Modern World

The problem of women's role in capitalist societies has been examined in depth by many theorists and philosophers over the past century. Marxist feminists, socialist feminists, and radical feminists have all contributed a variety of excellent work to the discussion, but the issue is clearly unresolved; we're all still talking about it, after all. Debates on this topic are greatly varied and concerned about several more particular issues, and this paper is concerned with two specific aspects of feminist applications of Marx: home economics and theories of women's labor. It is generally agreed that Marx himself insufficiently regarded women when expounding his theories of class struggle and history.<sup>14</sup> In all honesty, it is rare (if not unheard of) that a theory constructed and refined by a man prior to the mid-20th century captures anything exclusive about the experience of women, historically or contemporarily. This being said, the appropriation of Marxist concepts and economic theory to study the material conditions of women has yielded considerable philosophical innovation and involvement. Descriptions of the process of the subjugation of women coupled with formal applications and critiques of historical materialism offer one grounded, holistic illustration of the situation of women throughout capitalism; the image given is one of male/patriarchal entitlement, privilege, and conscious, casual devaluation of women's labor.

Once again, Federici gives a historical context and background to abstract theories of economics and oppression. Federici describes the devaluation of women's labor as a pivotal moment occurring in the middle ages. The increasingly influential Church and the increasingly powerful state both benefited from the systemic oppression of women during this time; tools of

---

<sup>14</sup> Catherine MacKinnon, *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State*, 13-24



violence and coercive acts specifically aimed to threaten the well-being of the people, and women were easier targets than men. The system had already begun to infringe upon their (albeit limited) freedoms, and it was little trouble to dress misogynistic rhetoric as religious doctrine in order to repress women to a greater degree.<sup>15</sup>

Federici attributes the ‘historic defeat of the female sex’ in the modern era to the criminalization of women’s control over reproduction and the expulsion of women from the crafts; in the early medieval period, there were several documented forms of birth control, so women had a considerable amount of power over their bodies. They were free to go into sex work- what was then perhaps the most lucrative position for a woman- and to have a say in the actions of their bodies. They did not have to marry; they could make a decent living as prostitutes and courtesans. However, because prostitution could exist outside of the reach of the coercive violence which the Church and state exercised over everything else, it posed a legitimate threat to the absolute power of these two entities. By removing female bodily autonomy and control over reproductive processes, by demonizing contraceptives and abortion practices, and by explicitly denigrating and persecuting female sex workers, the state and the Church effectively revoked any sort of social or economic liberties which women may have possessed. Women were now expected to perform ‘wifely’ duties without prompting. Access to the female body and its sexual faculties was a male right, and sex, maternity, and childcare were reduced to the status of forced labor. Women had no choice in the matter anymore; marriage was their only possibility and their duties were not optional.<sup>16</sup>

This shift redefined women as non-workers; their labor and the products of it were now a resource to be exploited and women themselves were property to be owned or traded. Their work

---

<sup>15</sup> Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 80-91

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 92

was erased from the history of economics and disregarded as insubstantial. Marriage was their main career- if it could even be called that- and all other work was simply a hobby. This historical devaluation of female labor is the grounds on which modern workplace discrimination is rooted, Federici compellingly argues. When labor in the home is associated fundamentally with women and this labor is taken to be unproductive and naturally given, the labor of women as a whole begins to be culturally defined as worth less than that of men. The expulsion of women from the organized workplace and the banning of prostitution limited the economic choices available; if one did not marry, then she starved. At this point, the family was finally reconstructed as a locus for the production of labor power. Similarly, the proletarian woman became a substitute for the land lost to the enclosures, a basic means for production, and a communal good. This is what Federici calls primitive appropriation. In this new organization, every woman not already owned by a bourgeois man became a communal good. The new patriarchal order was formed.<sup>17</sup>

In the new patriarchal order in budding capitalist society, women were dependent on both employers and men. Federici makes a point of stating that unequal, gendered power distributions like this existed prior to the genesis of capitalism, however, before the transition to capitalism, women had access to the commons and communal assets. After the transition, “*women themselves became the commons.*”<sup>18</sup> Their work was considered a natural resource which existed outside of market relations. During primitive accumulation, the family became the primary place in which women’s labor was appropriated and concealed. A striking aspect of Federici’s account is her focus on the proletarian family and the ways that the wage prevented women from revolting against their domestic situations; she calls this the patriarchy of the wage.

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 90-97

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

The wage was an astonishingly powerful part of the new order; people were not visibly enslaved anymore. Waged labor gives the illusion of freedom without compromising any capital. This economic development caged proletarian women in the home more surely than ever before. Women were unable to find stable jobs within the crafts and prostitution grew more dangerous by the day, in contrast, the world appeared to be blossoming for proletarian men. They could own property, marry freely, and it seemed as though the possibilities for employment and promotion were endless. Coincidentally, many men were also free to bring their work home if they so wished, and wives were obligated to assist in the tasks when asked. Husbands could actively utilize their wives as reserve labor and be the sole recipient of the wage. Women had no access to the waged workforce, so financial control became a concrete reality of the proletarian home:

[Paying the husband for the work of the wife and excluding women from the workplace], made it impossible for women to have money of their own, and created the material conditions for their subjection to men and the appropriation of their labor by male workers. It is in this sense that I speak of the *patriarchy of the wage*. We must also rethink the concept of "wage slavery." If it is true that male workers became only formally free under the new wage-labor regime, the group of workers who, in the transition to capitalism, most approached the condition of slaves was working-class women.<sup>19</sup>

The wage became a very real, concrete expression of the budding patriarchy. This more than anything indicates that fundamental shift discussed earlier; it is not just that her subjectivity is stolen by the state and her husband, because now her very existence is reclassified. She is not a person, a laborer, a worker in the same sense as her male counterpart; she is a resource to be mined, manipulated, and forced into a useful tool for men. She is an animal to domesticate and tame so that she may bear the burden as her master reaps the benefit of her work.

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 98

The proletarian family could not afford to invest in reproductive work within the home, yet women's labor became increasingly more invisible in early capitalist economies. She was an extension of her husband, burdened by the expectations of her social position and left out of the freedoms which her labor allowed her partner. Women were shackled to men and harshly penalized for any attempt to break free from their situation of subordination and poverty. The division of labor and gender discrimination within the workplace is clearly rooted in the actions taken in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, as Silvia Federici aptly describes.<sup>20</sup> Heidi Hartmann even takes up this argument in the contemporary household by stating that there is still an inherent tension between wage-earners and non-wage-earners; Federici's assessment of the wage as a turning point for gender dynamics within the household is sound even in comparison to more abstract works of Marxist feminists.

Women were further oppressed by significant legislative action taken in countries across Western Europe between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. Then, in the 1800s, industrialization, imperialism, and colonialism steadily swept across the globe. This brought new trials and tribulations to the material situation of women. Heidi Hartmann's piece "The Family as the Locus of Gender, Class, and Political Struggle: The Example of Housework" addresses the shift in the family corresponding with the incorporation of wage labor; instead of maintaining its previous status as an income producing unit, the family became a center for the pooling of income. This system of income pooling and interdependence within the family led to the spread of the perception of the family as a singular united group; in reality, the bonds which still hold it together today were built upon inequalities due to the division of labor.<sup>21</sup> The household, and

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 99-100

<sup>21</sup> Heidi Hartmann, "The Family as the Locus of Gender, Class, and Political Struggle: The Example of Housework" in *Feminism and Philosophy*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 106-109

therefore the family, rose to political prominence as a result of state intervention against the political systems predating it, which were based on kinship bonds. By promoting the prioritization of forged household bonds over bonds of blood relations, the state destabilized the foundations of the systems which it was usurping.

Liberalist theorists like Locke contributed to the restructuring of the state as well; Locke asserts that authority of the state was derived from the consent of the property owners. Women were considered in this argument simply because to disregard them would compromise the logic. Hartmann states that later theorists overcame this challenge to absolute patriarchal authority by redefining the social spheres of life; the public life of politics and economics was divorced from the private life of the family/household, and men acted as the mediators between these two spheres. Women were relegated to the home and any overlap between the public life and the private life for women was only superficial.<sup>22</sup>

The necessity of redistribution of the wage and property within the home skews the power dynamic in favor of the wage-earner (historically, the husband). The illusion of unity within the family is simply that: an illusion. After all, “mutual dependence by no means precludes the possibility of coercion.”<sup>23</sup> This leads to her ultimate argument; the family does not represent a shared unified interest, instead, it is a locus of struggle. Gender relations, class relations, and political interests are all present within every family, and the tendency to assume that the family is an isolated in-group with unified and homogenous interests is diminutive and inaccurate. The interdependence of the family is more than just a product of love or agreement: “dependence is simultaneously a psychological and political-economic relationship.”<sup>24</sup> Hartman

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 110

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 107

is specifically concerned with the manifestations of this struggle within the home as they arise in housework. She finds that even when women work outside of the home as well, they are doing most of the housework and spending the most time contributing to these tasks. In situations where both the man and the woman are working outside of the home, the man is more likely to contribute than in situations where the wife stays at home, but the tasks he completes are less intensive and less important to the overall daily maintenance of the home.<sup>25</sup>

Silvia Federici illustrates the steady historical construction of the societal oppression of women by the state in the public arena, and Heidi Hartmann shows the forces of oppression and tension within the family and home itself. Within the same topic, Philip Kain argues that housework is not inherently alienating in the sense which Marx initially developed the term.

Kain's argument is focused on the definitions concretely outlined by Marx himself. However, feminist analyses of Marx's work have clearly indicated that his theorizing is not nearly concerned enough with the material realities of women's subordination by men; Catherine MacKinnon's work once again more than adequately covers the shortcomings of Marx's own writings:

Although he usually abjures moral critique as a bourgeois fetish, Marx displays moral sensitivities on women's work. Abhorring the 'moral degradation caused by capitalistic exploitation of women and children,' Marx observes: 'Before the labour of women and children under 10 years of age was forbidden in mines, capitalists considered employment of naked women and girls, often in company with men, so far sanctioned by their moral code, and especially by their ledgers, that it was only after the passing of the Act that they had recourse to machinery.' ... When men are exploited, it is a problem of exploitation; when women are exploited, it is a problem of morality.

[Moreover,] to Marx, women's employment contributes to undermining the power of the working man to resist the hegemony of capitalism. 'By the excessive addition of women and children to the ranks of the workers, machinery at last breaks down the resistance which the male operatives of the manufacturing period continued to oppose to the despotism of capital.' Mechanization and consequent attempts to prolong the working day are resisted by that 'repellant yet elastic natural barrier, man.' This resistance is

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 110-125

undermined by ‘the more pliant and docile character of the women and children employed on {machine work}.’ Women are more exploitable than men, not just more exploited, their character a cause rather than a result of their material condition. Women are exceptions to every rule of social analysis Marx developed for the analysis of human beings in society. They are defined in terms of their biology, with children as incompletely adult, in need of special protection, not real workers even when they work. The woman who works outside the home is a class enemy by nature. The possibility that working-class women are specially exploited by capital-and with proper support and organization might be able to hold out for higher wages, better conditions, and fight mechanization-is absent. Men who work for lower wages are a special kind of organizing problem. Woman's exploitability makes her a liability to the working class unless she stays home.<sup>26</sup>

Women, already disadvantaged in material society, are even excluded from serious consideration by the most progressive philosopher of his time. Women were effectively dismissed by this theory, which would shape entire nations for years to come. Obviously, an account based purely upon the hard definitions explicated by Marx is not going to be particularly compatible with feminist studies of material conditions. If one actually treats Marx's opinions on women and their roles within the family and workforce as valid assertions to build upon, then he will fall prey to the same casual sexism of his source work. This being said, *Marx, Housework, and Alienation* does tend to take the condescending, unconsciously sexist tone of Marx's original theorizing on women. Part of Kain's central argument is that housework, specifically child care, does not necessarily alienate women from the species life in the same way that laboring in capitalism does; this is based upon the assumption that once again, women are inherently invested in child care in a greater capacity than men by some natural disposition. This completely disregards the truth of the family and the home so eloquently described by Heidi Hartmann; the family is a direct reflection of the conditions in the economy, political arena, and social world around it. The family is not an insular unit of refuge outside of society.

---

<sup>26</sup> Catherine MacKinnon, *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State*, 17-18

Furthermore, it could be said that alienation of labor is not necessarily centered upon alienation from species, rather, alienation of labor is centered upon an alienation from social relationships. In a society where workers are alienated, there is a disconnect between self and the social world; their labor is labor without proof and access to results, labor without thanks, and labor with minimal satisfaction. The hallmark of capitalism is a deep-seated feeling of dissatisfaction and isolation from one's body, relationships with others, and relationship to nature. This is not relegated to factory work, and it is sincerely doubtful that Marx would not have recognized the necessity for progressive adaptability of his theory for technological and societal innovation.<sup>27</sup>

The household and housework benefits women in the most primitive sense: filling the basic needs of shelter, food, but not intellectual engagement. This is not to say that housework is mindless, but rather that it is perhaps more like the repetitive, draining routine of factory labor than is initially accepted by Kain. The fact of the matter is, as some of the feminist theorists cited have discussed, women do not see themselves reflected in a world they have created; they see themselves in a relationship where they do not belong, or, more realistically, they are dehumanized and reduced to biological ability. The political debates on reproductive autonomy in present day countries and the very real struggle of transgender women to be recognized as valid illustrate this ongoing conflict. Kain wants to argue that alienation only occurs within the household when women are restricted and isolated from the spheres outside of the family. As Maria Mies, Silvia Federici, and Heidi Hartmann have all discussed, this is a very real situation, not a possibility to be regarded from a distance. The family in capitalism has *always* been like this, since the very institution of wage labor into the markets and the expulsion of women from economic spheres of life in primitive accumulation. Alienation within the home is not initiated as

---

<sup>27</sup> Philip Kain, "*Marx, Housework, and Alienation*" in *Hypatia* (1993), 124-128



the woman moves outside of it, as Kain suggests, because the home is not the “natural” habitat of the woman.<sup>28</sup> It is not the case that women are predisposed to desire propulsive development of the species, and Engels, Marx, and Kain want to assert that women specifically desire this to a greater extent than their male counterparts. Men can indulge themselves in fancy and hedonistic pursuits and the species will still progress, while women are forced to labor by natural inclination or natural hegemony to maintain the momentum of progress. This is the view which Marx, Engels, and Kain all propagate in their explicit writings on gender and the family.<sup>29</sup> Philip Kain’s argument against the existence of exploitation within the family and alienation in the household is only valid by virtue of a staunch subscription to strict, antiquated definitions of Marxist terminology and from the presupposition that the family is an isolated unit outside of the sphere of economic and political relations. Kain offers several solutions for the problem of freeing women from the position which he has constructed in his piece, but as this situation is both inaccurate and unfounded, his solutions are useless. The problem with Kain’s account of alienation, housework, and the family is that he does not adequately consider the historical circumstances and conditions which gave rise to the current situation of women.

Catherine MacKinnon offers an attempt at synthesis between the philosophies of those who insist on strict readings of Marx and those who apply dialectics and other aspects of historical materialism more freely. Her argument in the chapter of *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State* addressing feminism and Marxism is that while many theories try to assimilate various forms from each movement together, the most critically useful theory which joins the two is “wages for housework.” This is not because it is a perfect argument or even necessarily a great one, rather, the theory accurately characterizes the criticisms of a patriarchally-dominated society

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 131

<sup>29</sup> Kain, 132; MacKinnon, 18-20

as well as the rigid Marxism which situates women as secondary players. As Kain's piece and the earlier criticisms from MacKinnon illustrate, Marxists consistently overlook the work of women, both within the household and outside of it. Women's work is simultaneously unproductive and unrealized in formal Marxist theory. MacKinnon believes- and rightly so- that "so long as women are excluded from socially powerful activity, whatever activity women do will reinforce their powerlessness, because women are doing it; and so long as women are doing activities considered socially valueless, women will be valued only for the ways they can be used."<sup>30</sup> This is one culmination of the theories discussed throughout this thesis; not only has the situation of women's subordination been historically founded through several key points in the transition to capitalism, but their active expulsion and exclusion from the realm which Marx considered productive labor has ensured that their position of inferiority cannot change- at least in the eyes of historical materialism.

Significant historic events during the beginning of the western transition to capitalism and the conceptualization of the family as insular led to great losses of freedom for women. Further political action taken to ensure the supremacy of the new state apparatus relegated them to the so-called private sphere of life and chained them to the home, the family, and above all else, men. Some theories of familial interactions and gender dynamics overlook the ways in which the family acts as a reflection of the economic relations, yet there are significant pieces of evidence within historic accounts and the example of housework to indicate that the family is more than just a private group united against the public world. Ultimately, a strict Marxist theory explaining the situation of female oppression is unsatisfying and inadequate; it cannot account for many realities of women's experience, nor does it offer any useful solutions to the problem

---

<sup>30</sup> Catherine MacKinnon, "Feminism and Marxism" in *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State*, 76-80

without situating women at the periphery of a greater issue. In this strict Marxism, women only find liberation as women-workers, not simply as women. A feminist Marxist theory of the subjugation of women must account for both the historic conditions of current gender dynamics and the concrete reality of female experience.

#### IV. Conclusion

Marxist and historical materialist approaches to feminism have reinvigorated the discussion of the oppression of women over the course of history and in the present. Feminist examinations of prehistoric relationships and primitive accumulation offer new perspectives into the discourse first initiated by Friedrich Engels. Maria Mies and Silvia Federici are two such feminist theorists who expand upon principles from *Origin of the Family*; Mies asserts that the difference which led to the oppression of women was not inherently biological but instead a matter of socialization and relation to nature. Mies asserts that the defeat of the female sex was inevitable at this stage as woman did not concern herself with violent tools of exploitation in the same way that man did. She criticizes Engels for a skewed application of “naturalness” and predestination to women, but she does not see that her own theory dangerously walks the line of these biases as well. Federici does not offer a different theory of prehistoric development of the division of labor or social sex differences, but she does offer immense insight into the process of primitive accumulation and the institutional manipulation of gender relations to solidify the power of the Church and state.

Federici also offers a valuable discussion of the exclusion of women from the workforce and external autonomy during the early stages of capitalism. Here, she asserts that the implementation of the wage, exclusion of women from the crafts, and the legal and moral persecution of prostitution led to the rise of the patriarchy of the wage. Married women were utterly and completely reliant on their husbands- which they were forced to take since they could not enter the workforce- for basic needs and economic security. Men gained even more power as the head of the household and actively utilized their wives and children as reserve labor; women did not receive any formal compensation for their labor in this manner and were effectively erased from the economic narrative and productive labor force. Divorced from the public sphere

of market relations and shackled to the private sphere of the family, women were reliant on the redistribution of the man's wage for financial security. Women's work became steadily devalued and hidden by the duality of patriarchal market and society, which is ultimately to blame for the issues of gender inequality in the workforce today. This discussion is picked up once more by Heidi Hartmann to illustrate the tensions within the family, which is a locus of struggle, as it reflects the greater tensions in the so-called public sphere. Women's labor is devalued and obscured by their social position within the family and housework often reflects the home as an exploitative, coercive environment for women. Men act entitled to women's labor because the work which is typically relegated to women is devalued and seen as a given resource in this cycle of subjugation. Unequal distributions of housework are therefore indicative of the home as an oppressive and alienating environment for women.

Philip Kain offers a typical Marxist perspective and counterargument on alienation in the home; it is his opinion that housework cannot be alienating because women's labor towards housework is not seen as productive. Instead it is considered by Marx to be a natural paradigm of values and free labor outside of the influence of capitalist society. His argument against the exploitative and alienating nature of housework and the family is already refuted by the theory coming into shape from the accounts of the historic development of the household and current accounts of housework and the family. Catherine MacKinnon's work in synthesizing strict Marxist theory with feminist theory further illustrates the necessity of a holistic account of the source and manifestations of women's oppression in capitalism. Until theories of the market and labor can be reconciled with theories of women's subjugation, there can be no Marxist feminist solution to the issue without compromising the integrity of the movement all together. By assimilating historical accounts/theories on the development and progression of gender dynamics

in prehistory and primitive accumulation with theories/accounts of the subordination of women in the modern era under capitalism, the greater issue of the origin and perpetuation of contemporary patriarchal capitalism can be understood from a more holistic- and ultimately, more useful- perspective. A solution and response to the problem of both class and gender conflict is possible, but not until these two aspects of contemporary critical philosophy are reconciled.

## Bibliography

- de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance de Borde and de Malovany-Chevallier. London, UK: Vintage Books, 2011.
- Engels, Friedrich. *The Origin of Family, Private Property, and the State*. New York, NY: International Publishers, 1975.
- Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. New York, NY: Autonomedia, 2014.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. New York, NY: Vintage, 1990.
- Hartmann, Heidi. "The Family as the Locus of Gender, Class, and Political Struggle: The Example of Housework." In *Feminism and Philosophy*, by Nancy Tuana and Rosemarie Tong, 104-128. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1995.
- Holmstrom, Nancy. "A Marxist Theory of Women's Nature." *Ethics* 94, no. 3 (1984): 456-73. Accessed January 22, 2020.
- Kain, Philip J. "Marx, Housework, and Alienation." *Hypatia* 8, no. 1 (1993): 121-44.
- MacKinnon, Catherine. *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State*. London, UK: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Holy Family, or Critique of Critical Critique*. Honolulu, HI: University Press of the Pacific, 2002.
- Mies, Maria. *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*. London, UK: Zed Books, 2014.